



THE REDISCOVERY OF MYSTERY

by Russell Kirk

Dr. Kirk, renowned author and national syndicated columnist, delivered this address before Hillsdale College students and faculty during the second seminar of the Center for Constructive Alternatives titled, "Images and Imagination: A Quest for Identity."

Who am I? That question troubled me when I was very young. One is fortunate if this problem enters one's head in childhood: for if one grapples with the conundrum as Hercules grappled with serpents in his cradle, he does not suffer an "identity crisis" in later years.

When a child, I used to look into a glass darkly. A recent version of the Bible translates that Pauline phrase as "Now we are looking into the riddle of a mirror." Staring fearfully at my reflection in a mirror, I used to ask myself, "Who am I?" Who is this little being to whom others have given the name "Russell Kirk"? What's in a name? I was conscious of my mirrored reflection: yet what is consciousness?—so the infantile metaphysician asked himself. Just who is this spark of consciousness beholding its flesh? Surely I, the beholder, was something more than flesh, I thought: for how could mere flesh ask the dread question, "Who am I?"

The awesomeness of such an inquiry by a child, I may add, is redoubled if he stands between two large mirrors, seeing his image reflected in both, reflection within reflection, diminished image succeeding diminished image, glass mocking glass, on to infinity, on to eternity, "Eternity, thou pleasing dreadful thought!" In heaven's name, who *am* I?

This question troubled the magnificent Hadrian, master of the world, and perhaps his ghost still ponders these mysteries, walking invisible the vast interior ramp of his tomb on the Tiber. This question perplexed the chief poet of our age, T. S. Eliot. One thinks of his Ariel poem "Animula":

The heavy burden of the growing soul
Perplexes and offends more, day by day:
Week by week, offends and perplexes more

With the imperatives of "is and seems"
And may and may not, desire and control.
The pain of living and the drug of dreams
Curl up the small soul in the window seat
Behind the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

These melancholy misgivings assail us all—or all of us who seem endowed with some fair degree of moral imagination and right reason. Who am I? Eliot wondered that, grievously, in his early poems when his studies in idealism led him perilously near the brink of solipsism. "I know who I am," Don Quixote de la Mancha exclaims, waking from his delusions: and as Miguel de Unamuno comments on those words, this discovery of one's true identity is a formidable act. Once we know who we are, and know that there are other real folk about us: once we understand that you and I are part of a community of souls—why, then it is possible to be fairly human, to live and to die with dignity.

My eldest daughter, Monica, when she was less than three years old, suddenly said from her high-chair at the kitchen table to her mother and me, "I like myself!" My wife was not sure that she had understood the baby aright: "What did you say, Monica?" And the tiny girl answered, confidently, "I like myself: me, Monca."

Monica Rachel Kirk had discovered who she was. It is well to acquire a tolerable self-esteem at that age. The peril of many, arising not long later, is that one may acquire altogether too much self-esteem: one may become Kipling's orangutang, "with too much ego in his cosmos." As Arnold Toynbee remarks in *An Historians's Approach to Religion*, the human condition necessarily is tragic. For within every one of us two great conflicting impulses work. One of these is a yearning to make one's self the center of the universe; the

im•pri•mis (im-pri' mīs) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things). . .

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other, a yearning for the love and communion of others. And this contest ceases not until death. The person properly called "normal" is one who has maintained some tolerable tension between these impulses. The triumph of the first impulse may lead either to destruction or to a splendid misery; the triumph of the second impulse may bring on a feeble anonymity or a slavish running with the pack.

We cannot find our way in this world without images; for, as G. K. Chesterton tells us, all life is an allegory, and we can understand it only in parable. Nevertheless the image often betrays. "Make unto yourself an image and, in defiance of the Decalogue, worship it!" the young John Randolph of Roanoke wrote to a friend. No man of his time possessed a stronger self-image than did "Mad Jack" Randolph; yet in the fullness of time he learned that he had been wrong, for we all are made in the image of God, and breathe only because of that divine original. The saint is a human being who has put down his vanity: one who really does love his God with all his heart and soul, and his neighbor as himself. Still it is not possible to know God unless one first knows himself; one proceeds from microcosm to macrocosm, from little human image to transcendent reality.

Because you and I are God's utopia, self-image is necessary: the old Hellenic truth, if you will, "Know thyself." Because you and I are God's utopia, also we endeavor to transcend the image of self and to glimpse the world beyond the world. My little daughter is strong in character because she knows and likes herself; but unless in the fullness of time she is able to see farther, to know and love something grander than herself, she will be—why, just an average sensual woman of our time.

Upon every American child in our time, there works the famous, or infamous, pressure of the "peer group"—that is, of juvenile mediocrity. Through what Henry and Brooks Adams called "the degradation of the democratic dogma," political assumptions are transformed into intellectual and moral assumptions. In the typical household, children watch television before they can speak—indeed, before they can understand language: they are exposed to all the banality and cross commercialism of TV, and all of them watch the same stupid programs. In school, most of them study the same dreary basic readers—which, as J. Frank Dobie said once, "would bore the brain of a hard-shelled terrapin." Superior achievement in school tends to be discouraged—sometimes even by physical menaces. School uniforms vanished years ago, but are supplanted by a fresh uniformity of bedraggled jeans and sweaters, the insignia of the proletarian Lonely Crowd. As they move toward high school, boys are introduced to the imagination-ravaging blight of drugstore pornography; and perhaps the girls, too, are instructed by drive-in salacious films. There comes in time, for many, the affliction of narcotics, spreading outward from city to suburb to rural region. Thus the imagination first is neglected and then is seared.

Such is the imagery which works upon the fancy of many of the rising generation. No previous generation had at its beck such instruments for corruption. Young people naturally look about for exemplars, models for emulation. Where do they find these nowadays? Why, possibly among television

buffoons, racing-car drivers, perhaps eminent men of organized crime. School is detestable to many of the rising generation, understandably; as for the family—the parents' recreation commonly is the boob-tube, and every year more mothers are out at work. "Generation will not link with generation," in Edmund Burke's phrase, "and men become as the flies of a summer." In such circumstances, when young people look for living models to pattern themselves upon, who can they emulate? Why, one another: these are "other-directed" children, much of a sameness. Everywhere one hears boys and girls saying, plaintively, "I don't want to be any different from anybody else." The image of the self is decayed to the image of the juvenile common denominator. Once upon a time, the saint and the knight, for most young people, were the exemplars; nowadays little lonely dullness imitates little lonely dullness, at best; and parents are thankful for this small blessing, when the alternative is to take for mentors the racketeer and the tart.



When the images of reality have fallen to such grossness, why wonder that the notorious Identity Crisis afflicts every corner of society, fastening upon even the more promising natures? Who am I—only a cypher? Do I belong to anything enduring, or signify anything more than a perishable and precarious body? How do I fit into this sensual egalitarian world? Why wonder that some turn to the fantastic and perhaps fatal imagery of narcotics, for some moments' relief from the pain of being human?

In other ages, one found one's self in one's tight-knit family, one's tradition-governed close community, one's

confident church, one's meaningful work. (Even following the plough confers identity of a sort.) For most people, that sort of identity sufficed. More inquiring minds and consciences, indeed, sought for loftier images; and these were found in religious art and music, in humane literature, in emulation of great and good men and women—living or dead. It is otherwise in our time, for most folk: and material gratifications do not compensate for the loss of self-confidence and loss of membership in a community of souls. One may remark parenthetically that the material gratifications begin to diminish in their turn, once a society begins to suffer from failure of nerve; and the individuals in that decaying society cannot see themselves clearly.

In some ages—the period we call the Renaissance conspicuous among these—the overweening ego claims too much. In other ages—ours among them—the curse upon humankind is a listless uniformity, a submerging of the self in the herd. One parallel with our time is the age of Constantine, as described by Jacob Burckhardt. Life grows increasingly monotonous and impoverished; the old beliefs trickle away; even those in the seats of the mighty are coarse natures; the centralized state discourages and perhaps penalizes individual achievement; and increasingly the people ask themselves, “Is life worth living? Really, is it worth living? What are we doing here?”

One similarity between the age of Constantine and ours is the proliferation of curious cults, much of the populace whoring after strange gods. Within such a cult, grotesque though its tenets may be, not a few people diminish the problem of identity by immersing themselves in the cult's mysteries: Leviathan swallows them, and that is precisely what they desire, or think they desire. The cult's distorted images occupy the unbearable vacuum that had been left by the vanishing of the old images of the decaying traditional culture. No longer is there need for awareness of one's own identity, it seems: one has but to conform to, and obey unquestioningly, the new commandments of the Savage God, or the absurd routine prescribed by some jelly-like set of abstractions.

In this year of our Lord 1976, one mode for shedding the burden of selfhood is to submit to a pseudo-religious tyrant—any unctuous charlatan will suffice—and spend one's days as a mendicant at airports, collecting alms for the greater glory of Simon Magus. The phenomenon that many air-travellers not merely submit sheep-like to this infernal nuisance, but actually surrender substantial hard cash to these young slaves, suggests that not a few airline credit-card holders don't know who *they* are, either. In Aristotle's definition, a slave is a man who allows others to make his decisions for him. The person who has lost his own identity positively rushes to the slave-master's shackles. I commend to everybody a sardonic English novel of nearly two decades ago, Nigel Dennis' *Cards of Identity*, which tells us how readily two or three clever and whimsical rogues can delude and enslave all sorts and conditions of people—supposing that their victims, representative enough of most modern folk, suffer from incertitudes as to whom they actually are. The man who does not know his identity still retains a soul, but that soul is blind and deaf and dumb.

Yet, as I am fond of remarking, cheerfulness will keep breaking in. The very chaos of cults suggests that there has commenced a reaction against the purposelessness and facelessness of the Lonely-Crowd society. Without exemplars and images, few people can realize the self. The flicker of the television screen, the bustle of the standardized shopping-plaza, the consolations of the dirty magazine, the violent film, the “mind-expanding” drug—these do not answer the eternal question; “who am I, and why am I here?” The flight from spiritual isolation into the craziness of certain cults is a form of incoherent protest against life without meaning and without self-knowledge. Once more mankind longs for signs and portents, for mystery and awe.

So we begin to discard the materialism and the mechanism of the past two centuries. Whether we throw away yesterday's nonsense to embrace tomorrow's nonsense, or whether we find our way out of superficiality into real meaning, must depend in part upon the images which we discover or shape.

For the question, “Who am I?” really means this: “Am I a spirit in prison? Do I have a soul? Am I made for eternity?”

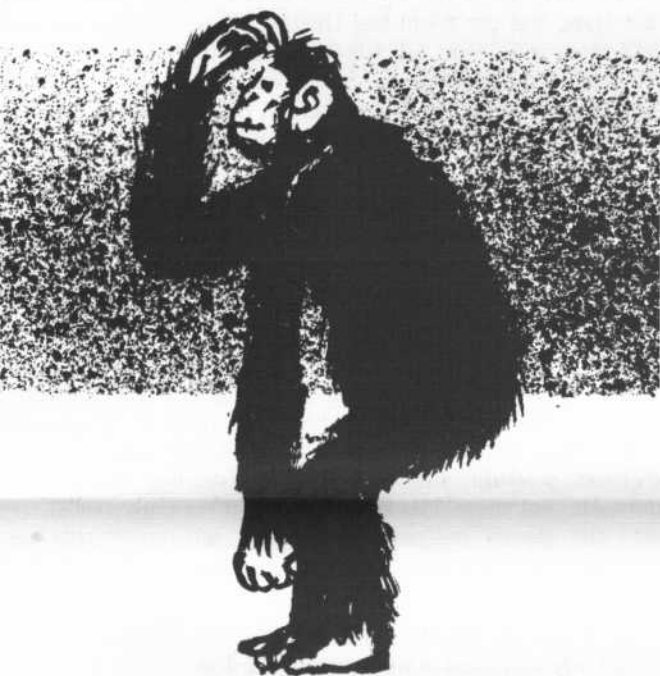
A principal cause of the twentieth-century Identity Crisis has been the image of man imparted by a vulgarized scientism. I myself was reared, in no small measure, upon the facile scientism and the shallow historical notions of H. G. Wells, popularizer of mechanism and materialism. Popular opinions lag perhaps a century behind theories in the natural sciences, so that by 1976 the scientific doctrines of 1876 have trickled down, through vulgarizers and ideologues, to the mass of men and women. Thus the typical man—or woman—in the street, nowadays, forms his understanding of human nature (and of his own identity) upon confused and muddy representations of nineteenth-century thought which he has acquired from half-educated newspapermen, quarter-educated TV pundits, and teachers whose interest in the realm of ideas ceased when they obtained their teaching certificates and their union cards.

Thus it is that when one of the national polling organizations, a few years ago, asked a representative sample of Americans whether they believed in human immortality, the majority replied that they weren't interested, one way or the other. Not interested? I suppose that such a reply really signifies that most people nowadays entertain a notion that “Science says . . .” I mean this: whenever anyone tells you, “Science says . . .” you may be sure he is about to tell you a whopper, probably for his own pecuniary advantage. True science does not speak with a single voice, or pretend to explain simply everything in heaven and earth. But the average sensual man nowadays entertains a vague notion that Science says . . . why, that we're descended from apes, and that this life is the be-all and end-all, and that keeping healthy is the main thing, and . . . well, anyway, we're not scientists, so we don't want to worry about stuff that doesn't get you anywhere financially.

Ultimate questions, for all that, keep intruding themselves, even into dull wits. Who am I? What am I doing here? If Holy Scientism will not answer these questions, perhaps Simon Magus can: certainly Simon says he knows. So we go seeking after strange gods. One after another, we embrace

and then repel those strange gods. D. H. Lawrence's Dark God of sexuality begins to pall upon us: the multitudinous Eastern gods of Transcendental Meditation don't deliver, despite the healthy fees we pay to be admitted to their company: perhaps next we will try Ares, the war-god. Give us a sign!

The average sensual man and the average sensual woman, though bored with mechanism and materialism and frightened by loss of self-image, never will get beyond the tricks of Simon Magus—not unless the prophet and the man of genius open the way for them. The crowd perceives by means of images, false or true. But the discoverers or shapers of images are persons of extraordinary perceptions, not governed by the idols of the tribe or of the market-place. And some such already have spoken to us, in recent years: I believe they will be heard increasingly, and that they will open our eyes to the great mysteries once more, and that they will show us old-new images which are true images. Some of these perceptive people began to make themselves heard decades ago—as when Sir Arthur Eddington wrote, “The world is made up of mind-stuff.”



I am suggesting that the natural sciences may open windows through which you and I may look upon images of beauty and truth. What we call “science” necessarily speaks in symbols and images, abstractions and intellectual constructions. By way of fuller illustration, however, let me quote to you a great-souled woman who died young, Simone Weil. First, a passage from her most influential little book, *The Need for Roots*:

The true definition of science is this: the study of the beauty of the world. (The motive of the scientist, if it is pure, must be the love of beauty.) The savant's true aim is the union of his own mind with the mysterious wisdom eternally inscribed in the universe. Scientific investigation is simply a form of religious contemplation.

Simone Weil compares the scientists of Hellas with the scientists of her own time—to the disadvantage of the latter—and then suggests (in her posthumous book *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, published in 1968) that because modern science falters and seems to lose its way, modern folk think that no truth whatsoever remains:

In the present crisis there is something compromised which is infinitely more precious than even science: it is the idea of truth, which had been very closely associated with science in the eighteenth century, and especially in the nineteenth. The association was very erroneous, but the habit has persisted with us. The disappearance of scientific truth appears to our eyes as the disappearance of truth, thanks to our habit of mistaking the one for the other. So soon as truth disappears, utility at once takes its place, because man always directs his effort to some good or other. Thus utility becomes something which the intelligence is no longer entitled to define or judge, but only to serve. From being the arbiter, intelligence becomes the servant, and it gets its orders from the desires. And, further, public opinion then replaces conscience as sovereign mistress of thoughts, because man always submits his thoughts to some higher control, which is superior either in value or else in power. That is where we are today. Everything is oriented towards utility, which nobody thinks of defining; public opinion reigns supreme, in the village of scientists as in the great nations. It is as though we had returned to the age of Protagoras and the Sophists, the age when the art of persuasion—whose modern equivalent is advertising slogans, publicity, propaganda meetings, the press, the cinema, and radio—took the place of thought and controlled the fate of cities and accomplished coupe d'état. So the ninth book of Plato's *Republic* reads like a description of contemporary events. Only today it is not the fate of Greece but of the entire world that is at stake. And we have no Socrates or Plato or Eudoxus, no Pythagorean tradition, and no teaching of the Mysteries. We have the Christian tradition, but it can do nothing for us unless it comes alive in us again.

Just so. Simone Weil could summon up images of the good, and unless we emulate her, we must sink into the condition of the prisoners in Plato's cave, mistaking shadow for substance, and so cribbed, cabined, confined for aye. As Simone Weil remarks, unless we perceive images, we will be ruled by force.

Images are representations of mysteries, necessary because mere words are tools that break in the hand, and it has not pleased God that man should be saved by abstract reason alone. Need we despair of recovering an awareness of mystery, and of regaining through our power of imagination those

images which nurture the good?

One of the inquiring spirits of our time, Arthur Koestler, has written several books in recent years which argue that the sciences will, or should, take a new direction: that the sciences' hope lies in exploration of what is called parapsychology, the realm beyond the five ordinary senses. The great question which parapsychology asks is this: "Who and what am I?"

According to the prevalent scientific speculation of our time, the newer science, you and I are collections of electrical particles, so to speak, held in combination by forces and influences which we do not understand at all. Outwardly we seem to be material flesh and blood—O that this too solid flesh would melt!—but that is illusion: we are such stuff as dreams are made of, positive and negative electrical charges, as is all other matter. And yet within each of us some soundless voice inquires, "Who am I?" This is the ghost in the machine, the immaterial impulse or mind-stuff which animates us. Our identity depends upon this directing power of which we are ignorant totally, and which we can delineate roughly only through images. I quote from Koestler's little book *The Roots of Coincidence*:

We have heard a whole chorus of Nobel Laureates in physics informing us that matter is dead, causality is dead, determinism is dead. "If that is so, let us give them a decent burial, with a requiem of electronic music. It is time for us to draw the lessons from twentieth-century post-mechanistic science, and to get out of the strait-jacket which nineteenth-century materialism imposed on our philosophical outlook. Paradoxically, had that outlook kept abreast with modern science itself, instead of lagging a century behind it, we would have been liberated from that strait-jacket long ago.

To discuss in detail the speculations of such thinkers as Weil and Koestler is beyond the scope of this lecture of mine. I am suggesting here only that man's own image of himself here at the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century may be altered profoundly by new scientific discoveries and theories—or rather, by the enlargement and fuller explanation of theories which already have been enunciated. Once again, I trust, we will be concerned with the soul and its images.

The image, I repeat, can raise us on high, as did Dante's high dream: also it can draw us down to the abyss. It is a matter of the truth or falsity of images. If we study good images in religion, in literature, in music, in the visual arts—why, the spirit is uplifted, and in some sense liberated from the trammels of the flesh. But if we submit ourselves (which is easy to do nowadays) to evil images in religion, in music, in visual arts, in much else—why, we become what we admire. Within limits, the will is free.

It is imagery, rather than some narrowly deductive and inductive process, which gives us great poetry—and great scientific insights. When I write fiction, I do not commence

with a well-concerted formal plot. Rather, there occur to my imagination certain images, little scenes, snatches of conversation, strong lines of prose. I patch together these fragments, retaining and embellishing the sound images, discarding the unsound, finding a continuity to join them. Presently I have a coherent narration, with some point to it. Unless one has this sort of pictorial imagery—Walter Scott had it in a high degree—he never will become a writer of good fiction, whatever may be said for expository prose.

And it is true of great philosophy, before Plato and since him, that the enduring philosopher sees things in images initially. I have dreamed only one metaphysical dream in all my life, but my little vision may serve to illustrate this point.

Only a few years ago, I dreamed a brief dream of order. In this vision, I found myself sitting in what appeared to be a club, very like a London club, conversing with my chance neighbors on the questions which puzzled Milton's angels: fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute. In particular we spoke of whether God is just in saving some souls and condemning others. Of a sudden, the lot of us—chairs and all—were transported in the twinkling of an eye to outer space, where we hung suspended between heaven and earth, after the fashion of Mahomet's coffin.

The disputants and the chairs were the same, there among the stars, but the room had changed. It was eight-sided now, and there were eight tall windows, each hinged in the middle. Through these windows we could see the stars and the blackness of infinite space. And we sensed that we were in eternity: that never would we be returned to things terrestrial.

And we all knew, without saying anything, that so long as we sat in our chairs, conversing, nothing would happen to us. Food and drink would appear at one's elbow, for the mere wishing. If we accepted these conditions, we were secure enough—forever.

But some of our number were impatient of restraint, whatever the penalty for breaking the rules of this peculiar club. Those unquiet spirits hurried to the windows. Upon the slightest pressure, the hinged window-frames would swing outward, and those who leaned against them were precipitated into the ghastly gulf of empty space, self-annihilated; wailing they went, and were lost to us forever.

As for me, I kept to my chair, reflecting somewhat smugly, "Well, my argument is vindicated. God does not damn anyone: those who destroy themselves do so from choice, refusing to accept the conditions of human existence."

I do not contend that this is a brilliant image, but it did teach me something. From sources unknown and perhaps unknowable, such true visions come to us—greater images to those minds and hearts which are greater than mine. The ancients said that true visions in sleep come from between the Gates of Horn, and false visions from between the Gates of Ivory. If we are uncertain of the origin of the images which occur to us—why let us judge them by the images that have been given to us by men and women whose powers of per-

ception exceed our own.

For the image of what it is to be a man, turn often to the poets, in the larger sense of that word "poet." Read Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*—or, better still, see it well performed—and through images you will learn something of the character of sanctity. Read Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, and through images you will perceive something of the folly of rebellion against nature—and find, too, how much reading of books can make a hero of a janitor. Thomas á Becket was flesh once, and Bradbury's janitor is imaginary; but that difference doesn't signify. What matters is the image of man, in the splendor and misery of his condition. Such images teach us to be full human beings ourselves.

What are you and I? We are what we imagine ourselves to be, in large part. William Butler Yeats advises us to clap masks to our faces and play our appropriate parts: the image becomes the reality. There is something, after all, in Randolph's bold admonition, "Make unto yourself an image and, in defiance of the Decalogue, worship it." Randolph did not mean that we should cast a Calf of God: rather, he was saying that we grow into what we determine to make ourselves—God

willing. We all suffer from heavy limitations of mind and body and circumstance. Yet if we seek out images of the good, and apprehend them, and exert our wills, we will do something well—if it is only to die well. We find our identity in the images we revere and in the work we undertake. If we seek out the images of bravery (much neglected nowadays), we may grow brave: if we kneel before the images of cowardice, we must become cowards.

In churches, in schools, in families, imagery is shabbily ignored today: and yet the time cries out for imagination, and so do many of the rising generation. The most distressing thing about our recent presidential election was that neither of the major-party candidates exhibited the smallest spark of imagination. For great states are governed by imagination, and if there is no true imagery at the top, those states become ungovernable.

Similarly, if you and I neglect the claims of the imagination, we are terribly punished—by losing our identities. If you and I are not moral beings, we are mere walking and talking machines composed of organic tissues. It is the moral imagination which confers our identity upon us. That lacking, men and nations come to the world's end—"not with a bang, but a whimper."

Hillsdale College is marked by its strong independence and its emphasis on academic excellence. It holds that the traditional values of Western civilization, especially including the free society of responsible individuals, are worthy of defense. In maintaining these values, the college has remained independent throughout its 132 years, neither soliciting nor accepting government funding for its operations.